What We Talk About When We Talk About Democracy

Michael D’Innocenzo and Etana Jacobi want to make democracy work as it should. Is that possible?

By Roman Kudryashov
Editor

When we first started, they said one hundred deliberations was unrealistic,” says Hofstra University professor Michael D’Innocenzo. He exhales, then excitedly starts again: “But last week, we hit 93! We’re on track to have a hundred before 2012 ends!”

D’Innocenzo is talking about town-hall style meetings led by Deepening Democracy Through Deliberation, a program he runs alongside Etana Jacobi and Bernie Stein. D’Innocenzo is a distinguished teaching professor for the study of nonviolent social change; Jacobi, at 22, is a leadership scholar at Hofstra’s Center for Civic Engagement; and Stein has taught psychology, government and history in high school for more than 30 years.

“The challenge has been to have an engaged civil society between work and home,” Jacobi says. “But when people finish with one forum, they’re walking out and telling us, ‘I didn’t know I was interested in so many issues. I didn’t know the other party had so many valid opinions.’ If we come back a second time, they’re self-reporting to be better, more active citizens.”

Deepening Democracy Through Deliberation began in response to Hofstra’s hosting a round of the 2008 and 2012 presidential debates. “Our students and community will be able to witness, firsthand, the democratic process,” said Hofstra president Stuart Rabinowitz to mark the occasion.

With help from the Kettering and National Issues Forum institutes, D’Innocenzo and his students took up that mantel and decided to lead an affiliated program of town-hall deliberations with local high schools and libraries. The leaders make it clear that it’s not about debate, though. Debates have winners and losers. The focus is on deliberation and conversation. There’s no vote at the end and deliberations often end with conversation fading into the distance, behind car doors, long into the night.

Each forum begins with a personal stake in the topic. The conversations are limited to a single topic in one and a half to two hours. These topics can be as wide-reaching as immigration and debt, or youth violence and America’s national security. Then, at least three positions on the topic (not identified by party) are presented and discussed. At the end, the deliberation closes with the moderator asking every participant for their comments on the process, as well as if any common ground was found.

Deepening Democracy’s work is necessary because it offers a stark contrast to the problems of today’s politics. There is no money involved. There are no simplified answers. There are

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Hofstra’s Town Hall style Presidential debate showed just how violate debate can be...
no party-lines to keep to, no pledges, no media, and no spin. “I asked a class one time what they thought of the presidential debates,” Jacobi says. “They mentioned a few zingers, how the candidates looked, the energy, people’s reactions. None of them mentioned anything related to policy. That’s why we deliberate, not debate.

“You approach this as a citizen who has a vested interest in coming up with an answer,” Jacobi continues. “Ultimately, it is about finding common ground, but we do that by examining the trade-offs. That’s when we ask, ‘Are we comfortable with doing that?’ There may be no perfect solutions reducible to sound-bites, but even if no common ground is found, participants walk away more understanding, more empathetic.”

“Time spent arguing is, oddly enough, almost never wasted.” – Christopher Hitchens

The range of opinions and quality of discussions is at times surprising, says Jacobi. “Particularly high school students feel empowered during these meetings. They’re asked to have their own voice, where before they’d defer to their parents or teachers.”

Also interesting are the cross-generational discussions, including one hosted at East Meadow Public Library. Like out of an O’Henry story, high school students were willing to cut their future benefits for the sake of the elderly, while the elderly proposed to cut their current benefits so the Social Security system survived for their children and grandchildren. That’s a position almost unheard of from politicians, who are supposed to represent popular opinion.

The forums are intentionally kept small to allow everyone to speak. Eighteen participants is optimal; by 25, it becomes too many. Because the groups have been kept consistently small in classrooms and libraries, D’Innocenzo says he thinks they’ve been more effective on Long Island than anywhere else in the nation, reflecting on his 25 years of doing such work with the National Issues Forum Institute.

But is talk cheap? What will happen after those 100 planned deliberations finish? Most important, America is a democracy of over 300 million people, not small groups of eighteen.

How to follow up to these deliberations is a question then that hounds the program on both the Institutional level and the deliberative level. After forums finish, many participants
consider how to follow up. Depending on the issues, Jacobi has heard proposals to lobby politicians and to deliberate more. Sometimes, local representatives attend, but only identify themselves in the end.

Aside from its own moderators (often Hofstra students involved with the program), Deepening Democracy has been reaching out and training new moderators. The deliberative model they’ve been using is now being franchised out to more classrooms, more locations.

“This is just the tip of the iceberg for what Hofstra’s Center for Civic Engagement does,” Jacobi says. “We’ve had such interest that we just continued signing up more and more locations. ... We’re working on another program now, featuring more intergenerational conversations, and even bilingual conversations.”

Deepening Democracy does not pretend to have all the answers. Often, they don’t have any of them. What they do claim to have is the tools for getting at those solutions.

“Politics is increasingly becoming the domain of specialists, but it should be the domain of people,” wrote Czech dissident and later-President Vaclav Havel in 1995. The times never change, and what was true then is true again now: Deepening Democracy Through Deliberation is just what we need to do.

Deepening Democracy tries to run at least two forums per location. In East Meadow, they ran a forum in June 2012 on “Immigration in America.” Here are the highlights, as National Issues Forum Institute’s issue guide, presented as “What Might Be Done. Some Tradeoffs.”

Streamline the process of granting visas to qualified immigrants. But this means accepting more immigrants when jobs are tight, resources are strained, and when it’s difficult integrating the immigrants already here.

Create a path to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants by making them pay back-taxes and learn English. This rewards and encourages illegal entry, while penalizing legal immigration.

Lower the levels of immigration and strengthen borders. This would divert already scarce resources from education and healthcare, while discouraging a legal flow of business and ideas.

If you’d like Deepening Democracy Through Deliberation to visit your school or library (or have any questions for them), they can be reached at lideepensdemocracy@gmail.com or via lideepensdemocracy.wordpress.com.
Deepening Democracy Through Deliberation

Where does democracy and deliberation break down? Four questions with Deepening Democracy Through Deliberation’s Etana Jacobi:

After speaking with the Etana Jacobi and Michael D’Innocenzo of Deepening Democracy Through Deliberation, I again sat down with Jacobi to ask her thoughts on some of the pitfalls of democracy, deliberation, politics and problem solving. My questions are highlighted in bold and her answers follow.

When the issues are too gray, are you afraid of a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” response?

We have some forums where people feel that way, but surprisingly, that is not how people feel at the end. They usually want more time.

I don’t want to oversell what we do, but I don’t want to undersell its importance. We don’t expect to solve the problem of America’s role in the world or issues of national security in the basement of a library with 18 people; but that doesn’t mean that conversation itself isn’t worth it. It could take you to unexpected places.

Don’t politicians already have these deliberations behind closed doors? Isn’t simplifying the issue required to sell it, to get people to vote?

The experience our fellows have is that we need to talk about the other sides, we need to complicate things. The discussion we’re having right now is too simplified, too binary.

Our goal is not to have everyone decide what option they’re going to pick. Many don’t know what the other side can even offer. A binary conversation easily becomes a yelling match.

The goal of debate is to win; the goal of deliberation is to find common ground.

What are some common themes that show up in arguments?

A lot of these topics intersect very often, and so we try to keep people on topic.

Nonetheless, money in politics almost always shows up. It shows up in different guises. It goes from, “Why are we spending $600 million on an election, when we have trillions of dollars in debt?” to the corrupting influence of money on politics and power, or, “How do we spend our money more productively?”

It’s so common, I think the Kettering Institute has begun working on an issue guide for it.

How do you handle disagreements and digressions?

One of the moderators I work best with has the complete opposite political viewpoint from me, but we have a great chemistry that keeps the conversation going.

Because the focus is on finding common ground and not on winning, people usually want to keep talking and we don’t reach deadlocks too often.

That said, the nonpartisan moderator plays a major role in guiding the discussion. We train all of our moderators for this. At least in these deliberations, no one’s expertise makes them more valid than anyone else.